



Town of Groton, Connecticut

Meeting Minutes

Town Council Committee of the Whole

45 Fort Hill Road
Groton, CT 06340-4394
Town Clerk 860-441-6640
Town Manager
860-441-6630

Mayor Rita M. Schmidt, Councilors Genevieve Cerf, Joe de la Cruz, Bruce S. Flax, Bob Frink, Rich Moravsik, Deborah L. Peruzzotti, Heather Bond Somers and Harry A. Watson

Tuesday, August 26, 2014

6:00 PM

Town Hall Annex - Community Room 1

REGULAR MEETING

1. CALL TO ORDER

Mayor Schmidt called the meeting to order at 6:04 p.m.

2. ROLL CALL

Members Present: Mayor Schmidt, Councilor Cerf, Councilor de la Cruz, Councilor Flax, Councilor Frink and Councilor Moravsik

Members Absent: Councilor Peruzzotti, Councilor Somers and Councilor Watson

Also present were Town Manager Mark Oefinger and Executive Assistant Nicki Bresnayan.

3. Calendar and Communications

Town Manager Oefinger distributed an e-mail he received from Captain Lahti of the Submarine Base regarding the availability of the USS Groton sail and fairwater planes.

Also, the Town Manager received an e-mail from the Town Attorney asking to meet with the Town Council in executive session regarding a settlement on an ongoing legal issue. A special meeting of the Committee of the Whole may be scheduled for June 2nd prior to the Town Council meeting.

Councilor Watson arrived at 6:07 p.m.

Members Present: Mayor Schmidt, Councilor Cerf, Councilor de la Cruz, Councilor Flax, Councilor Frink, Councilor Moravsik and Councilor Watson

Members Absent: Councilor Peruzzotti and Councilor Somers

4. Approval of Minutes - None

5. UNFINISHED BUSINESS

None.

6. NEW BUSINESS

2014-0236 FYE 2015 Fire District PILOT

Discussed

- Old Mystic

Town Manager Oefinger explained that during budget deliberations, the Council asked to meet with fire districts prior to distribution of PILOT funds. Old Mystic Fire District board president Carl Strand, vice president Michael Pacheco, and Chief Ken Richards were present.

Councilor Peruzzotti arrived at 6:08 p.m.

Roll Call: Members Present: Mayor Schmidt, Councilor Cerf, Councilor de la Cruz, Councilor Flax, Councilor Frink, Councilor Moravsik, Councilor Peruzzotti and Councilor Watson

Members Absent: Councilor Somers

Discussed

In response to Councilors' questions, Chief Richards and Mr. Strand provided the following

information. The fire department buildings and equipment are owned by the district. There are 37 active volunteers that participate on a regular basis and seven full-time employees.

The firefighter layoffs in the Poquonnock Bridge Fire District have not affected Old Mystic at this point because Poquonnock Bridge received the majority of its mutual aid from the sub base fire department.

Most of the 37 volunteers are certified as Emergency Medical Technicians or Emergency Response Technicians. The age of volunteers ranges from 14 to late 50s, with the core group between the ages of 18 and 41. The district's pension is managed by the Town of Stonington and the district pays a monthly fee in addition to contributions. OPEB is not an issue for the district. Copies of the most recent budget and statistical information will be provided to Councilors through the Town Manager's office.

Chief Richards explained OSHA's two in two out requirement if there is no imminent threat to life. Mutual aid is an agreement to provide aid if needed; it is not an automatic response. The problem is that if there is a true emergency, depending on the number of first responders, they are the only resources for six to eight minutes. There is a time lapse from the time first responders arrive and mutual aid arrives. In Old Mystic, there are five firefighters on during the day. At night, there could be a significant amount of time until mutual aid arrives. In a normal house, fire doubles in size every minute.

As for medical calls, if a department with limited manpower goes out for a medical call, mutual aid will go for a second medical call, but the response time increases dramatically. In general, the number of medical calls has increased significantly. The fire department is often waiting for the ambulance because they are busy.

Busier departments (more calls) will spend more money on maintenance, equipment, and vehicles. Apparatus is a major part of the budget.

Councilor Flax asked if taxpayers in different fire districts should pay different amounts for fire protection. Mr. Strand stated that it is impossible to answer that question. Old Mystic responds in two towns, Groton and Stonington and has considerably more residential development than other districts. Town-wide service would not be bad if the Town had an even tax base and equitable service. Chief Richards stated it is not fair for a department that did what was right to take on the burden of another district that made different decisions and consideration should be given to the person steering the ship."

The Old Mystic Fire District covers 26 square miles and 17,000 people. The commercial and industrial base is on the Stonington side; the residential base is on the Groton side. The district pays for all volunteer training. Chief Richards explained the process which consists of about 650 hours of basic training. He characterized the idea that volunteers can be put into service immediately as hogwash."

Training at the Mystic Education Center is open to everyone. Training equipment was obtained by the Old Mystic Fire District through federal grants with a 5% match. The equipment is maintained with revenue generated by the training. Old Mystic has one tower ladder. At full extension, the ladder is 100 feet high, but the reach depends on the distance from the building.

All full-time employees are salaried and non-union. The wage step program and annual increase for each person is determined by the district board. A wage comparison is conducted every three years to assure that the pay scale is equitable.

Chief Richards reviewed ISO ratings. Old Mystic just had its ISO rating rescheduled and they

dropped a full point to a 4, which is outstanding for a mostly volunteer department. He credits Old Mystic's success to a great district board that understands what is required to run a fire department. A fire district's ISO rating has a big impact on homeowner insurance rates.

In conclusion, Chief Richards noted that if the call volume in Old Mystic increased to the same level as Poquonnock Bridge, he would need to add paid firefighters. Volunteers current received a \$20 stipend for being at the building for 12 hours and a per call payment.

Mayor Schmidt thanked the Old Mystic Fire District representatives for their attendance.

- West Pleasant Valley

President of the West Pleasant Valley Fire District Brad Julian and Treasurer Benjamin Courant were present and provided the following information for the Council. The West Pleasant Valley Fire District does not have a fire department or any equipment; they contract with the City of Groton at a cost of about \$280,000. The district mill rate is 3.2. The cost changes annually based on the City's fire department budget. Mr. Courant expressed concern with the addition of 42 non-taxable units being added at Fairview Odd Fellows, which increases fire department support under the district's contract with the City. Another concern is the failed Mardie Lane development, which is impacting home values in the area.

Town Manager Oefinger provided a background on the failed Grove Avenue Subdivision. Three duplex lots out of 20 have been built on, but the construction is horrific and the units are unoccupied. The Town has spent significant funds on legal issues. The Town Manager offered to have the Town Attorney meet with the Council to provide an overview of the situation and Mayor Schmidt asked for that meeting to be scheduled.

The five member district board is elected and meets three times per year. The district receives mutual aid from other departments. Sixty-one percent of all calls went to Fairview in 2012-2013. Dr. Kent Lagasse, a district resident, is currently on a state board to review medical calls and the emergency response system. The 911 system is being used when someone falls out of bed or to provide transport for no good cause. As a non-profit, Fairview does not pay any taxes for the service.

Councilor de la Cruz encouraged people to attend their local fire district meetings.

Mayor Schmidt thanked the West Pleasant Valley Fire District representatives for their attendance.

2014-0231

Merritt Property Athletic Fields Presentation

Discussed and Recommended no action taken

Mark Berry, Director of Parks and Recreation, and Chad Frost of Kent Frost Architecture were present. Mr. Berry distributed an Athletic Fields Needs Assessment and a Merritt Fields Master Plan. Funding for the Merritt Fields plan was approved as a CIP project in FYE 2014 to quantify field needs and address the shortage of fields.

Mr. Frost reviewed the Athletic Fields Needs Assessment first and described the process used to determine needs and assess current fields. Key findings are summarized in the report. Discussion followed on safety risks of natural and synthetic fields. The next steps in the process were a capacity analysis based on field types and availability per week and demand analysis, which was determined through multiple-user interfaces. Total game hours and total practice hours needed per week were coded to the type of field. The greatest deficit in the Town is the unlighted regulated rectangle field (similar to Poquonnock Plains Park) greatest deficit. For ball diamonds, there is a balance of surplus and deficit, but most fields are semi-private facilities.

Discussion moved to the Merritt Fields Master Plan. Mr. Frost explained that the needs assessment quantifies the need, but how to justify the cost to the taxpayer is a political issue. The Master Plan identifies a dollar per hour cost for field time that could be used as a basis to charge for the fields. Groton is an extremely active community. The national average for youth that participate in sports is 17%; in Groton it is 42%.

Tournament play is high in the needs assessment. The Master Plan identifies an amount that out of town families spend to travel to a tournament recreation event. If the Town includes a destination like Groton does, a family is likely to vacation and spend more money in the community. Sports tournaments are a gateway experience to expose people to the area. There is a cost to the taxpayer for fields, but there is also a benefit to the community.

Mark Romano, Athletic Director at Fitch, explained that Title IX is equal opportunity for male and female athletes. There is currently a disadvantage for female athletes at Fitch.

Mr. Frost noted the significant juggling that occurs at the high school to find fields. Needs are being met using assets that are not under the control of the Town. There is a shortage of indoor facilities as well, but the study only considered exterior fields.

Mr. Frost reviewed a conceptual plan for fields on the Merritt property including the main entrance on Route 1, parking that loops around the outside of four fields, concession stand, pavilion, playground, bleacher banks and lighting. Parking will serve all of the fields in play at once. For weekend play, additional parking is available at Fitch. Mr. Frost noted that artificial turf is significantly more expensive than grass and the ROI is lengthy. All fields would be multi-use, with ball diamonds located at Sutton Park. Frost noted that there are some grants available to offset costs and the selling of rights or advertising to generate revenue is a community decision.

Mr. Frost reviewed a summary of impact on operating budget. With a full build out of three natural and one synthetic field, maintenance costs increase by \$29,000. Many contingencies have been included in the cost estimate which is based on 2014 dollars.

The Town Manager noted that the presentation is informational at this time. The Board of Education has expressed an interest in the Merritt property for a middle school, which is being explored by the School Facilities Initiative Task Force. The deeds for the properties have been researched and Mr. Frost is confident that active recreation can be done on the property. It is Mr. Frost's engineer's opinion that if the property is used for something other than recreational open space, the Town would have to purchase it back from the state. Mark Berry stated he hopes to build public support and conduct fundraising initiatives to help offset the cost of the fields.

Mayor Schmidt thanked Mr. Frost for his presentation.

2014-0238

Downtown Mystic Merchants Association Banner Program Funding Request

Discussed

Judy Hartley and Rod Desmarais of the Downtown Mystic Merchants Association described the proposal to implement a banner program in downtown Mystic. The Town has banner hardware that was purchased with streetscape funding. The Association is looking for the Town to fund the program. There are 27 poles that can be used to hang banners. The group is proposing 19 unique designs with generic, logo, and seasonal messages. The cost to begin the program is \$9,180.

Mayor Schmidt asked if there has been any consideration given to the impact on traffic and if it will be a distraction for motorists. Ms. Hartley stated the banners are not that big and they will be above the line of straight sight. They are primarily aesthetic.

Town Manager Oefinger reviewed funding options including a supplemental appropriation to use contingency funds; the \$200,000 budgeted by the Town Council for economic development; or the \$40,000 budgeted for marketing purposes. A transfer from contingency over \$10,000 requires RTM approval. Another consideration given the price is the need for the Town to conduct a bid.

Councilor Flax suggested that the banners advertise other places in Groton such as Fort Griswold and the Nautilus Museum. He expressed concern that the Downtown Mystic Merchants are always complaining about the Town and yet asking for money for this project. He would like to see a better relationship between the Town and the Association.

Ms. Hartley reiterated the merchants' concerns with snow removal and trash collection in downtown Mystic. Councilor Flax noted that these are money issues for the Town and other businesses do not get the same services. Mr. Desmarais stated that the merchants do praise the Town for the solutions, but the complaints are embarrassments for the Town and should be addressed.

Councilor Frink agreed with the suggestion that the banners highlight other areas of the Town. Ms. Hartley stated that the Association wants to work with the Town on the design and production of the banners.

A motion was made by Councilor Moravsik, seconded by Councilor de la Cruz, to allocate (transfer) \$9,180 from Contingency funds for the downtown Mystic banner program.

Councilor Cerf expressed concern with the proposed number of banners and she criticized the advertising aspect. She expressed a desire to see a more specific plan. Mr. Desmarais noted the details will be worked out between the merchants and the Town. Councilor Cerf suggested that the Historic District Commission also review the banners.

The Town Manager noted that banners in downtown Mystic have been discussed for a long time. This is an aggressive and complicated program. Public Works has offered to change out the signs, but only on a seasonal basis (four times per year). The Town Manager encouraged Councilors to view the banners on Bank Street in New London and Thames Street in the City of Groton, and to consider walking West Main Street to understand proposed banner locations. He added that it would be more productive to work out the details of the program ahead of time.

Discussion followed on the materials, colors, and pricing options for the banners. Ms. Hartley noted that the light poles will accommodate lighted wreaths as well, but they have not been priced.

Councilor Peruzzotti left the meeting at 8:39 p.m.

Roll Call: Members Present: Mayor Schmidt, Councilor Cerf, Councilor de la Cruz, Councilor Flax, Councilor Frink, Councilor Moravsik and Councilor Watson
Members Absent: Councilor Peruzzotti and Councilor Somers

Discussed

Discussion followed on conducting a contest for design of the banners. Ms. Hartley stated she does not have time to run a contest, but the Town can do it. Design of the banners and paying for the effort were discussed.

A motion was made by Councilor Cerf, seconded by Councilor Frink, to table this item to the next Committee of the Whole meeting.

The motion carried by the following vote:

Votes: In Favor: 6 - Mayor Schmidt, Councilor Cerf, Councilor Flax, Councilor Frink, Councilor Moravsik and Councilor Watson
Opposed: 1 - Councilor de la Cruz

Discussed

concurring that for the next meeting Councilor Flax will reach out to the high school about a design contest; Councilors will look at banners in other communities; and Mr. Desmarais will prepare a more detailed presentation including the number and location of banners.

2014-0226 Process for Resale of Town Owned Property Revision

Discussed

Town Manager Oefinger explained that the Town adopted a Process for Resale of Town Owned Property in November 2013, but the procedure needed to be clarified. The six properties under consideration by the Town Council were all acquired through foreclosure so they do not have to go to the RTM unless the Town decides to sell a parcel reserved for Town purposes at a later date. Sal Pandolfo, Director of Finance, reviewed the revisions to the process.

A motion was made by Councilor Watson, seconded by Councilor Flax, that this matter be Recommended for a Resolution.

The motion carried unanimously

2014-0159 Resale of Town Owned Property Acquired through Tax Foreclosure

Discussed

Sal Pandolfo, Director of Finance, briefly reviewed the six properties under consideration, recommended action, and a revised resolution in light of clarification of the Process for Resale of Town Owned Property.

A motion was made by Councilor Watson, seconded by Councilor Flax, that this matter be Recommended for a Resolution.

The motion carried unanimously

2014-0021 Disposition of Fitch Middle School

Discussed

The Town held a surplus sale at Fitch Middle School on Saturday and will probably hold another sale in October or November. The Council reviewed a proposed Memorandum of Agreement between the Board of Education and Town of Groton outlining a proposed transfer on October 1, 2014. The Town will assume responsibility of the mechanicals on September 1st. No money has been set aside to maintain the building so staff will be coming to the Council for funding. Town Manager Oefinger reviewed a detailed timeline and responsibilities.

LEARN is still interested in leasing a portion of the building, but their interest has waned because they can't get into the building at the start of school year. There may also be building and fire code issues which may make using the building cost prohibitive.

A motion was made by Councilor Flax, seconded by Councilor de la Cruz, that this matter be Recommended for a Resolution.

The motion carried unanimously

2014-0234 Acceptance of Crawford Lane in the Crawford Way Subdivision

A motion was made by Councilor Watson, seconded by Councilor Cerf, that this matter be Recommended for a Resolution.

The motion carried unanimously

2014-0237 Connecticut Office of Brownfield Remediation and Development Assessment Grant Program

Discussed

Town Manager Oefinger explained that the Town has submitted a grant application to the Connecticut Office of Brownfield Remediation and Development Assessment for two Town owned properties - the former Nutmeg Farms site on Route 1 and the former Groton Heights Elementary School. No matching funds are required.

A motion was made by Councilor Frink, seconded by Councilor Moravsik, that this matter be Recommended for a Resolution.

The motion carried unanimously

2012-0050

Potential Disposition of William Seely School Property

Discussed

The Town Manager has met with two developers interested in the William Seely School property and the Chipperini property. Both developers would need to work out an arrangement with the private property owner, and the Town Manager has no idea when or if that will occur. The Town currently has no backup plan for relocating Parks and Recreation programming, but given the developers' timeframe, there may be other options.

2013-0156

Town Manager Annual Evaluation (2013)

Discussed

Councilor Flax asked that the Town Manager evaluations be placed earlier on the agenda and Councilor concurred.

2014-0155

Town Manager Annual Evaluation (2014)

Not Discussed

7. Consideration of Committee Referral Items as per Town Council Referral List

None.

8. OTHER BUSINESS

Town Manager Oefinger reviewed the e-mail that he distributed earlier in the meeting regarding the availability of the sail from the USS Groton, which is scheduled to be cut up in 2015. The major costs are cross-country transportation and site preparation. Unfortunately, there is no room for the sail at the USS Nautilus Museum. Bringing the sail to the community would be a major undertaking and require significant effort by committed individuals. The Town Manager asked Councilors to consider whether or not this is an effort they would like to support.

In response to Councilors' questions, the Town Manager noted that discussion of non-union sick and vacation pay can be conducted under the Non-Union Terms and Conditions referral. The anticipated start date for the new Director of Planning and Development is Monday, September 28th, but the Town Manager is not in a position to release the name of the individual who has been offered the position until the background checks are completed. The Town Manager is working on the RFPs requested by the Council and staff is working on the Airport Development Zone. Bids are out for demolition of Noank School.

9. ADJOURNMENT

A motion was made by Councilor Frink, seconded by Councilor Watson, to adjourn the meeting at 9:42 p.m.

The motion carried unanimously.